Book Reviews
Issue 6.2 (Winter 2017) — Not a Trump Issue

Review of *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America* by Michael Z. Newman (MIT Press)

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ABSTRACT   Newman examines the early period of video games in America when arcades and game rooms emerged in suburban malls around the country, televisions became 'entertainment centers,' and computers and game consoles were one in the same. As an introduction to the politics and economics of early home video games, Atari Age is a good starting point for readers looking to familiarize themselves with the foundational actors and social contexts surrounding the industry in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America. By Michael Z. Newman. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017, 264 pp. (Trade Hardcover) ISBN 978 0 262 03571 2 US List: 29.95

Due the growth of the market, attention paid to Gamergate, and the rise of eSports, interest in the cultural influence of video games has increased significantly in recent years. Much of this attention is focused on the current state of the industry and the rhetoric surrounding the medium, overlooking the early development of the industry that established cultural practices for the medium. In *Atari Age*, Michael Z. Newman does some of this work examining the early period of video games in America when arcades and game rooms emerged in suburban malls around the country, televisions became "entertainment centers," and computers and game consoles were one in the same.

Starting with the introduction of the first home video game console, the Magnavox Odyssey, in 1972, the marketing, technical advancements, and discussions surrounding videos games from this early era are examined, building an early social history of what is now a multi-billion-dollar industry. Newman's analysis takes the reader through the next ten years of development to the video game market crash that began in 1983 as a result of saturation of the market. Newman's concise, focused review of this decade of video game history is engaging, introducing readers new to game studies with an early social history of gaming, while still providing scholars studying popular culture examples that can contribute to their own analyses.

The analysis begins at the turn of the century, when Nickelodeons and other forms coin-operated entertainment appeared in arcades and parlors. Pinball rose in popularity during the depression, but association with gambling resulted in bans in many locations throughout the country including New York City. The introduction of flippers and popular culture like The Who's *Tommy* led to the resurgence of pinball in the 1970s, but continued associations with illicit behavior followed coin-operated entertainment as more machines appeared in various businesses. The presence of new computer technology and video games' placement in sterilized, typically white middle class shopping centers and malls

provided arcades with a reputation as a safe place for children to spend their leisure time, which followed video games as they entered homes during the same period. Arcades became a space for predictable, albeit typically masculine, interactions while also serving as a launch-point for video games that later made their way to the home market.

In the next chapter, Newman discusses the relationship between television and video games, as companies like Magnavox and Atari helped turn a formerly passive medium into one that is interactive, a transition aided by the introduction of other technologies like video tape recording and cable. Utilizing advertisements, Newman shows how the games were sold to the home market and how manufacturers expected families to utilize the consoles often based on their experience selling televisions, other electronics, or in the case of Mattel, toys.

The third chapter begins by discussing the evolution of the family room throughout the 20th century that radio, television, and then the video game console occupied. The ideal white middle-class suburban family had a living room in which everyone gathered for leisure time with each other, often around the television, which replaced the hearth or fireplace in most homes. Although video games transcended race or socioeconomics by the mid-1970s, advertisements celebrated the association between the bourgeoisie lifestyle and ownership of consoles. Originally marketed as a technology to be shared by the family, gaming quickly became a masculine pursuit as fathers were more likely to introduce a console into the home, often participating in play with their sons. Long held gender expectations for children during the late Cold War, lingering assumptions about the dangers of arcades, and games inspired by sports or simplistic narratives based on good defeating evil also contributed to video games being considered a more acceptable activity for boys.

Chapter four explores the intersection between video games, computers, and play, beginning with a short overview of the history of computers from huge machines only available at large institutions like colleges to personal computers manufactured for the home. As computers built specifically to play games, video game consoles were often the first home computer for many families. Later, personal computers were marketed as multi-functional machines that could engage the interests of all members of a family, from business management to Space Invaders, making many early consoles obsolete by the early 1980s. This combination of practicality and leisure is visualized in marketing material for personal computers throughout this period.

The fifth chapter reviews the reaction to the proliferation of video games into homes and communities, particularly the pushback from parents and lawmakers concerning the perceived truancy and danger associated with arcades and excessive play. Changes in business regulations and laws restricted where game rooms could go and when children could play games or even enter retail areas. This increased public attention also led to academic inquiry marking the true origins of game studies, as scholars gathered to share knowledge about the social impact of games. This is also reflected in popular culture from the early to mid 1980s, when techno- or game-centric stories appeared more frequently in television and film.

The last chapter focuses on the popularity of Pac-Man, which was released by Midway in 1980. In spite of a simple design and concept, the multimedia marketing of the Pac-Man character and related properties served as an example for future video game franchises, while also helping to accelerate the saturation of the home video game market that would result in the industry crash three years later.

As an introduction to the politics and economics of early home video games, *Atari Age* is a good starting point for readers looking to familiarize themselves with the foundational

actors and social contexts surrounding the industry in the 1970s and early 1980s. At points, it does seem the focus on advertising and trade press limits potential engagement with other possible influences on perceptions of video games, but it still useful overview of the origins of what has become a global cultural form.

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